

# **PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the right to practice religion freely, except where that practice infringes on another person's rights or where it violates public laws, safety, and the welfare of marginalized groups.

As of year's end, a proposed constitutional amendment put forward by Prime Minister James Marape in 2021 that would define the country as Christian had not been introduced in parliament. Political opponents, civil society groups, and some religious groups continued to object to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation and that the amendment could spark conflict among the largest faith groups. A lawsuit filed by the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'i opposing the government's plan to erect a monument to the country's Christian identity in Peace Park in Port Moresby, which is land owned by the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'i, continued at year's end. Some national ministries continued to instruct civil servants to participate in weekly prayer devotionals, but government officials said individuals could opt out without repercussions. Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. All of these institutions were Christian. On August 26, the National Day of Prayer and Repentance, Marape emphasized what he said was the country's Christian identity and said, "Without God in our constitution, our diverse country will find it harder to be united."

Civil society representatives and religious leaders again said gender-based violence, including the killing of women and their daughters accused of sorcery, was increasing, and that many perpetrators were not prosecuted because they had connections to senior government officials and societal leaders. In 2021, a parliamentary committee report concluded sorcery accusation-related violence was "absolutely unacceptable" and arose "from the misunderstanding (and sometimes the deliberate manipulation) of traditions and religion to harm innocent people, in particular women and children." The committee determined that on average, 388 people were accused of sorcery each year in the highland

provinces. One-third of the allegations led to physical violence or property damage, with victims suffering death, permanent injury, and other serious harm from torture. The Catholic Diocese of Wabag reported there were 11 women and girls under its care during the year because they were victims of such violence. According to the diocese, three women in the diocese accused of sorcery died as a result of being beaten and tortured. A Catholic Church representative told *Al Jazeera* witch-hunting in Enga province was becoming more barbaric and more frequent.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of equitable distribution of governmental support for religious groups with government officials, including from the Department for Community Development and Religion. Embassy officials engaged with government officials and civil society representatives to urge that any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. Embassy officials encouraged religious tolerance and religious groups' roles as health and educational service providers in regular meetings with the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches (PNGCC) and local religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.8 million (midyear 2022). According to the most recent census in 2011, 98 percent of citizens identified as Christian. Approximately 26 percent of the population are Roman Catholic; 18 percent Evangelical Lutheran; 13 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 10 percent Pentecostal; 10 percent United Church (an offshoot of the London Missionary Society, Australian Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand); 6 percent Evangelical Alliance; 3 percent Anglican; and 3 percent Baptist. Other Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kwato Church, and the Salvation Army, together constitute 9 percent. There are approximately 60,500 members of the Baha'i Faith. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database, 3.3 percent hold indigenous beliefs. Newer, self-identified fundamentalist Christian religious groups are increasing. Many individuals integrate Christian faith with indigenous beliefs and practices. The Jewish community in Port Moresby (locally referred to as the Messianic group) totals approximately 800 members, of whom almost 40 percent are local converts. The Muslim community numbers

approximately 10,000, including local converts. Most Muslim expatriate workers live in Port Moresby, and Muslim converts live in Port Moresby or villages in the highlands.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides the individual the right to “freedom of conscience, thought, and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs,” except where that practice infringes on another person’s rights or where it violates public laws, safety, and the welfare of marginalized groups. The preamble of the constitution refers to “our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours.” There is no official state religion.

Religious groups are required to register with the government to hold bank accounts, own properties in the religious group’s name, maintain limited individual liability, and apply to the Internal Revenue Commission (IRC) for exemption on income tax and to the Department of Treasury for exemption of import duty. The IRC does not maintain accurate information on how many groups are registered or from which religious group. To register, groups must provide documentation, including a list of board or executive committee members and a constitution.

According to the law, Christian religious instruction in public schools is compulsory. Students of non-Christian religious groups may opt out with approval of the school principal. Religious organizations are free to establish private schools, but students deciding to opt out of religious instruction might be asked to transfer to public schools.

Foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities. Religious workers receive a three-year, special exemption visa from the government. Applications for the visa require a sponsor letter from a religious group in the country, an approved work permit from the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, and a 100 kina (\$29) fee.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

As of year's end, the government had not released the results of a nationwide poll from 2021 on a proposed constitutional amendment that would define the country as Christian, and the proposed amendment had not been introduced in Parliament. In 2021, media outlets reported Prime Minister Marape said the change would not take away the rights of a person as enumerated in the constitution, but it would reflect the fact that a majority of citizens in the country practice Christianity. Marape said the government would commit two million kina (\$583,000) to help in the polling process and another three million kina (\$874,000) for a unity pillar monument at the Peace Park in Port Moresby, meant to symbolize the country's Christian identity. The Peace Park is located on land owned by the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'i, which at year's end was in litigation with the government over the issue. Political opponents, civil society groups, and some religious groups, including the PNG Council of Churches, Catholic Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Evangelical Alliance, continued to object to the proposed amendment, saying the country did not have an exclusive ethnic or religious affiliation, and that the controversy could potentially cause a "holy war" among the largest faith groups for supremacy of one denomination over the others and against religious minorities. Opponents to the proposed amendment said if the country were declared Christian, the government would be obliged to identify which denomination was the state church. Some religious opponents of the amendment also continued to say it would undercut the sentiment that all people are children of God.

Parliamentary sessions and most government meetings continued to begin and end with Christian prayers, but according to parliament officials, persons of different faiths were able to opt out with no repercussions. The Speaker of the House selected a member of parliament to start the sessions with a Christian prayer. According to senior government officials, some national government agencies continued to tell public servants they had to attend weekly morning devotions for 10 to 20 minutes; the specific day of the devotion varied by region and agency. Pastors from different Christian denominations led the morning devotional sessions. Individuals choosing to opt out of these activities could do so without negative consequences, according to the same government officials.

The Department of Education continued to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in public schools. According to sources, almost all students attended. Representatives of Christian churches taught the lessons, and there was no standard curriculum. Children whose parents did not wish them to attend religious instruction classes or take Christian life studies classes were able to opt out, and there were no cases reported during the year of a principal denying approval.

The government continued to fund churches to deliver health and education services through the Church-State Partnership Program, which received additional funding from international partners. PNGCC member churches – including the Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist Union, Roman Catholic, United, and Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Salvation Army, as well as other churches and organizations as associate members – continued to operate approximately 60 percent of schools and health services in the country. The government subsidized these institutions using a formula based on the number of schools and health centers run by each church. In addition, the government continued to pay the salaries of and provide benefits for the majority of teachers and health staff (generally members of the civil service) who worked at these church-administered institutions, as it did for teachers and health staff of national institutions. The church-administered institutions provided services to the general population irrespective of religious beliefs, and operations were not religious in nature.

Individual members of parliament continued to provide grants of government money to religious institutions in their constituencies to carry out religious activities. All of these institutions were Christian.

The PNGCC continued to work with provincial governments to establish provincial church councils.

On August 26, on the National Day of Prayer and Repentance, Prime Minister Marape emphasized what he said was the country's Christian identity. He said, "To identify with Christianity is to anchor our national foundations on the Rock of Ages, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of Life.... Without God in our constitution, our diverse country will find it harder to be united."

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Civil society representatives and religious leaders said gender-based violence, including the killing of women and their daughters accused of sorcery, was increasing, and that many of those responsible were not prosecuted because they had highly placed connections in the police or with political figures. Sources reported no law existed specifically prohibiting sorcery accusation-related violence. In 2021, the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-based Violence wrote, “This type of violence is absolutely unacceptable: it is not excusable as part of PNG’s culture but rather, arises from the misunderstanding (and sometimes the deliberate manipulation) of traditions and religion to harm innocent people, in particular women and children.” The committee estimated that nationwide, the number of sorcery accusation-related violent incidents between 2000-2021 was over 6,000, resulting in an estimated 3,000 deaths nationally. The committee determined that approximately 388 people were accused of sorcery each year in the highland provinces. One-third of the allegations led to physical violence or property damage. Victims suffered death, permanent injury, and other serious harm from torture, such as burning, cutting, tying, or being forced into water. The committee said cases may have been underreported, as victims feared further stigmatization.

Media reported the Catholic Diocese of Wabag included in its 2021-2025 pastoral plan instructions to pastors to raise awareness and aid victims of violence related to accusations of sorcery. The diocese reported there were 11 women and girls under its care during the year, compared with 11 women and three girls in 2021. According to the diocese, during the year, seven women returned safely to their communities, three women from the diocese accused of sorcery died as a result of being beaten and tortured (compared with two in 2021), and two victims remained in the hospital as of October.

*Al Jazeera* reported that in July, trucking company owner Jacob Luke died, possibly of a heart attack, while walking in Lakolam village in Enga Province. The following morning, members of Luke’s tribe accused nine women, including two in their sixties and one who was pregnant, of *kaikai lewa* – secretly removing the victim’s heart and eating it to gain “virility.” The report said that they tied five of the women naked between two poles and assaulted them vaginally with hot irons while a mostly male crowd that included children and members of the victims’ families watched. Following what *Al Jazeera* described as “a tense standoff” with villagers, police and a layperson from the Catholic Church rescued five of the

women several days later. The other four women had already died as a result of their injuries. The Catholic Church's sorcery accusation-related violence coordinator in Enga Province told *Al Jazeera* that witch hunting in the province was becoming more barbaric and more frequent.

As in previous year, religious leaders, through the Church-State Partnership Program, discussed working together to address social issues that affected congregation members, such as education, health, gender equality, fragmentation of family values, and sorcery accusation-related violence.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy officers discussed with government officials, including those from the Department for Community Development and Religion, the importance of equitable distribution of government support for religious groups. Embassy officials engaged with government officials and civil society representatives to urge that any moves to declare the country a Christian nation did not conflict with the freedom of religion stipulated in the constitution. In August, embassy officers attended national prayer events and Repentance Day ceremonies, engaging key government officials and civil society leaders on the importance of religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and the relationship between religion and state. Embassy officials continued to attend a monthly interfaith dialogue.

In February, embassy representatives attended an interfaith dialogue to discuss the constitutional inquiry on making PNG a Christian nation. In November, embassy representatives discussed with the PNGCC the role churches played in countering trafficking in persons.

In regular meetings with the PNGCC and local religious leaders from the Evangelical Alliance, National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'i, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, and Jehovah's Witnesses, embassy representatives discussed religious tolerance and religious groups' role as health and educational service providers.